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Engaging with families and relationships

E. Kay M. Tisdall

This chapter addresses issues arising from engaging with participants in families and relationships' research, with five accounts that illustrate engagement as an on-going and fundamental research process.

When undertaking fieldwork with people, researchers face the typically complicated negotiations of initiating, sustaining and leaving research relationships. There are practical issues – from going through various formal and informal 'gatekeepers' to access actual participants, to organising how and where to undertake fieldwork, to feeding back when participants have moved on with their lives. There are relationship issues – from engaging with busy gatekeepers when research is not their priority, to balancing roles within fieldwork, to ending (if indeed there is an end) the research interactions positively for both researcher and participants. And there are ethical issues, which frame these practical and relationship issues but also add others: for example, how to fulfil external expectations around informed consent and protection of 'vulnerable' participants, and internalised principles of respectful research.

The accounts in this chapter focus on research conducted with children and young people¹; however the concerns raised highlight practical and ethical

¹ Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is defined as a person under 18. It is recognised that many 'young people', below this age, do not want to be labelled as children.

issues pertinent to research on families and relationships more broadly. Ethical regulation of social science research has grown exponentially in the Minority World². Now almost any research project must gain approval from at least one ethics committee – but sometimes multiple ones, depending on research access strategies. Codes of Practice and ethical guidelines have proliferated, providing ever-increasing detail on what researchers must do to protect potential research participants.

The current vogue for direct research with children has brought to the fore numerous ethical issues. Researchers within childhood studies have paid extensive attention to this: as a consequence, childhood studies has the potential to make contributions to research ethics more generally. Leading proponents of this flourishing interdisciplinary area (e.g. Prout and James 1990; James et al. 1998) have argued powerfully that children should be seen as social actors, with their own agency -- active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and the societies in which they live. This literature strongly critiques past research for treating children as passive subjects rather than active agents -- as 'human becomings' rather than 'human beings' (Qvortrup 1994) -- and unhelpfully focusing on a 'normal' childhood based on set child development stages.

According to this critique, past research frequently had serious ethical and methodological flaws. By not recognising children had rights themselves, consent for research participation was through parents rather than children. No concern was given to children who might want to participate but whose parents refused on children's behalf. Children might be participating in research without knowing what it entailed, what it was for and what would happen to the information collected. Methodologically, past studies might have asked adults to describe children's experiences without considering that

² The terminology of Majority World (for the 'Third World') and Minority World (for the 'First World') is used to acknowledge that the 'majority' of population, poverty, land mass and lifestyles are in the former, and thus to shift the balance of world views that frequently privilege 'western' and 'northern' populations and issues (Punch 2003).

children (including very young children) may be well able to express their own views. Rather than presuming that a child is incompetent, the critique challenges researchers to consider how competent they and their methodologies are at gathering the desired information.

Childhood studies thus radically challenged research practice and ethics (e.g. Alderson 1995; Alderson and Morrow 2004). For example, childhood studies has strongly argued against a front-ended, technocratic approach to ethics. Instead, it asks for a questioning, reflexive, and ongoing concern with ethical practice throughout all research stages. It has particular reflections on how to engage those who communicate through non-verbal means, who may not understand what research is, or who may have personal characteristics or structural impositions that make them more 'vulnerable' in a research context. Such reflections can be useful for research with other participants. These reflections also provide a strong testing ground for ethical practice generally; if practice positively addresses such issues, it is likely to be more inclusive and ethical for everyone.

This chapter considers three testing questions of engaging with families and relationships, illuminated by the five research accounts:

- Do certain access routes have particular ethical issues?
- Do certain settings have particular ethical issues?
- Do certain methods have particular ethical issues?

The chapter concludes by critically examining current ethical regulation, for its implicit assumptions and consequential limitations.

A focus on access

In the Minority World, researchers are rarely allowed directly to contact children under the age of legal majority to ask if the children want to be involved in research. Instead, researchers may well seek to gain their research sample or population through some sort of organisational access –

from official records held by the state or institutional support from those engaged directly or indirectly with children and/or their families. Such access can in itself require several layers of negotiation and approval, mirroring management and governance structures: for example, accessing families through Scottish schools would commonly involve gaining initial support from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (not required but influential), followed by official approval from the education division within each local government authority, and then gaining support from the headteacher in each school.

A further layer of negotiation is typically required for children under the age of legal majority – consent from one or both of their parents. For some ethics committees or organisations in the UK, such parental consent is an absolute requirement: without parental consent, the child will not be allowed to participate. In fact, this is a grey area in UK law, frequently misunderstood. Neither UK legislation nor reported case law requires parental consent to be given for social research - simply because this has never been addressed. The law (different for Scotland than elsewhere in the UK) does allow children, who are considered to have sufficient capacity, to consent to medical or dental treatment and/or to participate in civil processes (see Masson 2004). There are thus strong grounds for deciding that many children can legally consent to social research, in their own right. Nevertheless, whether or not it is legally required, practically many ethics committees insist on a signed consent form from a parent before a researcher can approach a child to participate.

These layers are aptly described by Dingwall (1980) as a “hierarchy of consent”. If senior personnel agreed to participate, Dingwall doubts that their subordinates would feel able to withhold consent. Spratt’s contribution [Box X] illuminates ethical and methodological tensions of such a hierarchy of consent, when discussing the practicalities of being a ‘guest in the school’, her presence being ‘conditional on the school’s good opinion of you’. As she describes, she wanted to present herself as independent of the school, while

utilising the school's resources to contact parents and children. This, however, may turn off certain teachers and families – 'subordinates' may be less compliant than Dingwall expects – and certainly excludes those who are already excluded from the organisation informally or formally. It can lead to further sample biases, as different selection methods can creep into gatekeeper's access routes; as Spratt experienced, this can result from the most helpful of intentions from those supporting access, like omitting children that might misbehave. Such problems show the 'flip side' of Dingwall's hierarchy of consent: a "hierarchy of refusal" (Tisdall 2003). Each layer provides another point where refusal can prevent a child ultimately participating.

Certain solutions have been offered, that focus on children's agency (see Alderson and Morrow 2004; Thomas et al. 1999; Tisdall et al. 2009). Children, whether they would be considered to have legal capacity or not, should be able to consent on their own behalf. If going through schools or other organisations populated by children, the research can first be presented to the children, who then take information and consent forms home to their parents. 'Opt out' consent might be used for parents, which requires them actively to disagree that a child be involved, rather than 'opt in'.

Yet such a legalistic rights approach does not take account fully the tensions felt by Hill [Box X] and Spratt. Hill's account describes a visit to Claire's father to discuss Claire's potential participation in the project. Hill found this visit extremely uncomfortable as the father discussed personal issues that informed Hill about Claire's life. Yet Hill was not including Claire's father in her study in his own right – he was a layer in the hierarchy of consent/ refusal – nor had Claire already decided to participate. Hill writes of the 'ambiguity of our relationship', unsure whether she should leave the room or whether her listening was key to establishing trust with the father – but where did that leave Claire, who did not know Hill has been told such details about her family life? Such tensions have also been found by other family researchers, as demonstrated in accounts by Song (1998) on recruiting adult siblings through

each other, Edwards and colleagues (1999) on recruiting fathers through female partners, and Lewis (2009) on family dynamics when recruiting parents and children to participate in a research project.

Spratt ends her account by recognising the need to allocate considerable preparation time with school staff, so they understand the research purposes and so that 'they trust us to work in our chosen manner within their school'. Relationship-building, and trust in particular, are mentioned by both Hill and Spratt as essential aspects of engaging participants, whether through institutions or parents. As elaborated elsewhere (see Bancroft, chapter 4), this requires time, emotional as well as practical work, and may create ambiguity and awkwardness for the researcher.

A focus on settings

This section considers the impact of research 'spaces' on research data and ethics. Human geographers have developed concepts of space, that recognise that space is not a static 'thing' but rather something produced and reproduced through everyday practices (e.g. Lefebvre 1991). Different social relations will create different social spaces, even in the same physical space. Foucault's work contributes the idea of spatial practices creating people as individuals. This point, for example, is taken up by Jenks for children:

"People are controlled in relation to the different spaces they inhabit; discipline works through the division and subdivision of action into spatial units. Think of children having a particular seat at a dinner table or in the car, being sent to their room, playing outside, going to school, attending assemblies, working in classes or gymnasias and, of course, being seated at desks, in rows in groups or whatever." (1996: 76)

Such ideas provide useful bases to examine the social spaces of research (Nilsen and Rogers 2005). For example, there has been attention to the (typically negative) impacts of undertaking research through and within

schools. Edwards and colleagues (1999, 2001) found their child participants, who had participated while in school, had varied perceptions of the research – from it being an educational activity, to being empowering, to being intrusive. The researchers reflect that the initial accessing through schools positioned the research as another form of schoolwork and subject to hierarchy and coercion. Here, fuelled by her desire to work ‘collaboratively and inclusively *with* rather than *on* children and families’, Spratt’s account suggests going beyond schools, to recruit children through youth clubs, family and community centres.

However, non-school settings can have similar problems, when there are elements of coercion and surveillance, as Philip’s account [Box X] shows. In her settings of a befriending project, a housing project and an alternative education project, she still found it difficult to balance assisting the project, as a means to reciprocate staff’s research assistance, and keeping perceived distances in order to work well with the young people. Such difficulties became very apparent when conflicts arose between staff and young people, and both groups sought her support. Relationships were at stake, with no easy resolution, and a direct appeal made to the researcher to take an active rather than observing role.

MacLean [Box X] writes of another common setting for research with children, and more broadly with families: the family home. The fieldwork methodology in this project was based on individual and private interviews; however, family homes were not always able to provide these ‘private’ spaces, for various reasons including social relations, spatial usage, and physical layout. She gives the example of the house’s main public room being a corridor to other parts, and where the family kept their computer. This account shows the social relations that create the ‘social space’ and how the ‘space’ is creating social relations. MacLean writes of compromising her ideal notions of research in order to fit around families’ needs and circumstances. At once, this example demonstrates practical issues for researchers, of particular settings, as well as ethical ones of maintaining confidentiality (see Bushin 2007, for similar experiences).

While Maclean's desire was for an individual and 'private' interview, what families offered was 'the main public room'. Children's research now frequently needs to tread a careful line due to child protection concerns: while privacy ticks the box for confidentiality and presumably greater openness, this is countered by a concern of too much privacy and the potential for (allegations of) child abuse (see Punch 2007 for discussion). It may well be that the most 'private' place in the house was a bedroom but no researcher in the UK would be advised to go alone to a child's bedroom with the child, and any ethics committee would likely prohibit it. The main public room might have been a 'private' space if, temporarily, other family members had not occupied or travelled through it, or indeed had gone out of the family home altogether (for discussion of time-space binds, see Nielsen and Rodgers 2005). The social relations of research, in combination with the social relations of that family, made and remade that social space, creating a particular context for that research setting that was not inevitable but created and maintained.

A focus on methods

How you choose to do your research – what methods you use – will inevitably raise particular ethical questions. In Maclean's account, she highlights the need to ensure participants were willing to be interviewed again, imperative for the longitudinal design of Timescapes and similar projects. As Philip's account [Box X] highlights, ethnography typically requires the building and sustaining of relationships between researchers and a number of different people over time. She writes of the dilemmas caused when the researchers became the most continuous professional person in the young participants' lives. A great deal of families and relationships research asks research participants to reveal thoughts and experiences about themselves and others. There is an aspect of intimate relationships (see Morgan, chapter 2) in many researcher-participant relationships, yet most researchers leave their ethnographic setting. How does a researcher manage a 'professional friendship' (to use Philip's phrase)? How does a researcher *positively* end

such friendships, when friendships more commonly are open-ended and without a final end in mind?

Nelson's contribution starkly illustrates how a particular methodology – here a self-report questionnaire – raises particular ethical issues. Large scale quantitative studies have been considered appropriate for researching particular behaviours, using self-report questionnaires to maximise responses and accurate information on sensitive issues. This has led to offering absolute confidentiality to respondents (e.g. see Testa and Coleman 2006). The difficulty then arises because the relationship between participant and researcher is only along a narrow band of confidential, and perhaps anonymous, information. Should a child's response to the questionnaire raise issues about the child's well-being, the researcher's promise of confidentiality limits the ability to respond. Nelson's account includes suggestions of ways to establish other types of relations, like including a tick box for respondents to request help.

The anonymous self-report questionnaire can be seen as on the opposite end of the relationships continuum from an ethnographic approach: the first is a very limited relationship between participant and researcher, causing problems when issues are raised outwith its parameters; the second is a multi-faceted, more holistic relationship, which causes dilemmas because of its intimacy and intensity.

Concluding thoughts: Reflecting on ethics

In a book about researching relationships, it is appropriate to consider how thinking about relationships challenges certain current ethical practices and assumptions. The intense surveillance of research plans by ethical regulation has sought to ensure that the research relationships are ethical. But there is a tendency towards a legalistic, formal approach and a contractual one at that.

Take the example of informed consent. This is highlighted as vitally important across ethical guidelines, is something that is written about extensively within

research ethics, and can dominate ethical thinking and discussions. Informed consent requires the researcher to provide the necessary information, in a way the potential participant can understand, so that the participant can make an informed decision about whether to participate or not. There will be specified information required (e.g. on what the research is for, on what will happen to the data, on anonymity), by ethical guidance and committees, considered essential for the participant to base her decision. A participant is not to be coerced into participating. If the participant were willing, she is then typically asked to consent formally: in the UK, at least, this is most frequently by signing a form. Sometimes verbal consent is the method used and this might be audio-recorded. While the ethics around research consent may have come from medical research (Alderson 1995), the construction has become a legalistic one.

As outlined above, discussions around children's consent to research are frequently around their own capacity or competency to consent, and parental responsibilities and rights (e.g. see Masson 2004; Alderson and Morrow 2005). These are concepts contained within UK legislation and, indeed, legal capacity is a necessity to enter into a contract. If someone were not considered capable (i.e. the child), then someone else must have responsibility/ right to act as a legal representative (i.e. the parent). Only then would the contract would be legal.

In some instances legal capacity is a necessary but not sufficient condition. For example, the basic principles of Scottish contract law (see MacQueen and Thomson 2007) establish that there must be a 'meeting of the minds'. Reported case law extensively debates whether parties on both sides have agreed to the essential terms: misunderstandings, misrepresentation, coercion or 'undue influence', would render the contract void (as if it never was) or at least voidable (it stops). Writing and signatures are strongly entwined with the legality of contracts; if there, then they are strongly persuasive that a contract has been made.

Law is a strong framework in the UK and many other countries in the Minority World, and can be a resource for the less powerful. But it is a limiting discourse (see King 1997) and a contractual, legalistic relationship does not necessarily capture the realities of participant-researcher relationships nor the embeddedness of research participants in their own relationships. This is sharply evident in the accounts discussed above and the ethical, practical and methodological problems raised. The actual experiences of research show that research participants' consent, for example, may be the bottom of a hierarchy of consent and refusal, a complexity of relationships which a researcher needs to negotiate and manage. While family members may agree to individual interviews, a researcher may in fact - like MacLean - have to adapt in practice to the realities of a family home and its functioning as a social space. The ethical concerns raised by Hill and Nelson are not addressed by the narrowness of a contractual approach. In Hill it is unclear who the parties would be to the contract – is the father acting as the child's legal representative? Or is Claire's consent to be privileged? – and the standing of confidentiality. The 'essential term' of confidentiality, for large scale self-report questionnaire studies, causes Nelson concerns where this goes against children's well being and safety.

Focusing on children as social actors has led to certain trends in childhood studies research. The barriers raised by gatekeepers, from professionals to parents, are frequently seen as unhelpful hurdles on the way to gaining the key consent – that of the potential child participants. Yet, if those in the child's network of relationships were not prepared for the child's participation, they might be less able to support the child should the research cause some distress. In most research, what a child says will comment on others in that child's social worlds; respecting and recognising this can entail at least providing key people with information about what the research intends to do. Researchers do not always reflect on the barriers they put up to, say, media inquiries wanting to talk directly to research participants, for fears of harmful or unethical or even just unhelpful contact (see Tisdall 2005). Researchers can be gatekeepers too.

The focus on children, and their consent, comes from a worthwhile agenda to respect children, to recognise their rights, as social actors themselves. Childhood studies often aligns this with claims that children are agents, which neatly corresponds with assumptions within contract law about autonomy, individuality and legal capacity. Only recently has childhood studies been challenged for its assumptions of a static, individualistic agency which ignores the fluidity of identity and the changing influences of diverse relationships with people and things (see Prout 2005; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Tisdall 2011).

The lens of relationships allows us to examine current ethical practice, to question its assumptions and explore any opportunities. If there were limits to the contractual approach, what are the alternatives? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such alternatives? If we recognise families as containing individual members in social relations with each other, how might that create a different approach to involving family members into research and how we carry it out? Yet how do we not lose a focus on those traditionally marginalised, such as children? If we think about involvement in research – whether as a researcher or a participant – as a relationship that is not solely a contractual one, this may well assist us in the very real difficulties we experience in entering, sustaining and leaving intense research involvements or difficulties in hearing confidential or sensitive stories.

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